Shel Talmy

American Ears in a British Invasion

by Danny McCue

Shel Talmy arrived in London toward the close of 1962 with an armful of acetates, among them Lou Rawls and Beach Boys outtakes supplied to him by a friend employed by Capitol Records. In the tradition of rock raconteurism at least as old as Colonel Tom Parker promoting Elvis by forming the Presley midget Fan Club, he conned his way into a position as an independent producer with Decca Records, the company which only three months earlier had rejected the Beatles.

Within months, and for the balance of the Swinging '60s, Talmy was mining British gold as a journeyman producer for the Pye, Brunswick, Polydor and United Artists labels with such hitmakers as the Kinks, the Who, Manfred Mann, the Easybeats, and Chad and Jeremy. By the time executives at Decca discovered his deception, as he's sure they did, he had the residue of success, not only on the British charts, but, more significantly, back home in the United States, under his fingernails. Talmy remembers his first British employers as too gentlemanly to ever discuss his hoax with him.

Prior to launching his career as a producer in Britain, Talmy was a recording engineer at Conway studios in southern California. It was there that he spent laborious hours perfecting microphone and other techniques while working with a succession of local surf bands and jazz and R&B combos. At 21, afraid that life was passing him by, he embarked by cruise ship for England, intending to work there just long enough to pay for the trip. He stayed 17 years, working on a schedule that had him discovering bands, rehearsing them and helping them arrange their material, before going into the studio, his goal being to record the most material in a minimal amount of time, a mode of operation that made for many fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants sessions.

The Kinks' Dave Davies remembers Talmy as seeming sympathetic to their music, but that didn't save them from being pressured by the budgetary clock, as illustrated by Davies' recollection of the session that produced the Kinks' first major hit, "You Really Got Me."

"That's a very spontaneous record," he explains, "because we were running out of time in the studio. We were actually re-recording it as we were very unhappy with the first version which was much slower and it was like, we had to do it. We were on the spot. And if you hear it, it's got that anxiety about it (laughs): 'They're going to throw us out of the studio any minute.'"

Recently returned to the producer's seat from a self-induced retirement and relocated to Los Angeles, Talmy wonders if the chemistry would exist if he could get the Kinks into the studio again, and marvels at the promise a Who session with Simon Phillips behind the drum kit would hold. Today, in his late forties, he clearly relishes the role he played in the British Invasion. Among the records he produced are some of the greatest hits of the rock 'n' roll era: "All Day And All Of the Night," "Tired Of Waiting," "Dedicated Follower Of Fashion," "My Generation," "I Can't Explain," "The Kids Are Alright," "Friday On My Mind" and "The Mighty Quinn."

Goldmine: When you initially embarked on your trip to England, did you have any idea that the music scene there was about to explode?

Shel Talmy: Hadn't a clue. I went there totally naive. I got off the boat — I actually took a boat over — as green as you could get and I contacted some of the people I had recommendations to see and basically looked around the music scene there. It was very antiquated; they were still doing almost nothing but covers [of American hits] and the stuff that wasn't covers that got on the charts was so weird as to be something that would never cross national boundaries. It was uniquely English. There were no bands making it whatsoever at that point.

Goldmine: What were some of the first projects Decca gave you to do?

Shel Talmy: They gave me two artists; One was Doug Sheldon, an English singer who by today's standards would be almost a ballad singer, and insisted that I cover "Lollipops And Roses," which got into the charts. Then they gave me three guys called the Bachelors, three Irish guys who had been a harmonica trio, and I think that perhaps Decca didn't buy my story totally because I wound up teaching these guys how to sing. They had never done it before.

I think Decca was testing me. It took weeks of having them up in my apartment and saying, "you sing this part," and "you sing that bit" before we could go into the studio. They were like this pseudo-country 'n' western band, and I have to confess that they appalled me because, being from the States, I knew what the real thing sounded like. The first record we did was the old standard "Charmaine," and it was a very big hit. By that time I think Decca realized that everything I had told them was bullshit, but it didn't matter, and they were gentlemen enough not to mention it.

Goldmine: Do you think you were influenced by what other, more established producers were doing at the time?

Shel Talmy: No, I don't think so. Phil Spector? He wasn't doing as much at the time. Jerry Wexler? Sure, I loved the records, but I think I was more influenced by Leiber and Stoller than Jerry Wexler, if by anybody — I really liked the records they were doing. I'm not sure influence is the right word to use [here] because my theory of what a record producer is or does is that it's totally unique. There's no way you can copy anybody else because you're not going to hear something the same way somebody else is. I think a producer has got to do what he hears at the time and base his actions on his judgment, his instinct. I don't know any successful producer who has tried to copy anybody else. I mean, perhaps I'm wrong.

Goldmine: Okay, so how did Leiber and Stoller affect you?

Shel Talmy: Oh, only in that I thought they made great records and they wrote great songs. I was affected in that way: yes, I liked to make records that were that good.

Goldmine: By '63, '64, things in the States like Motown and Stax had really begun to happen. Did you give any thought

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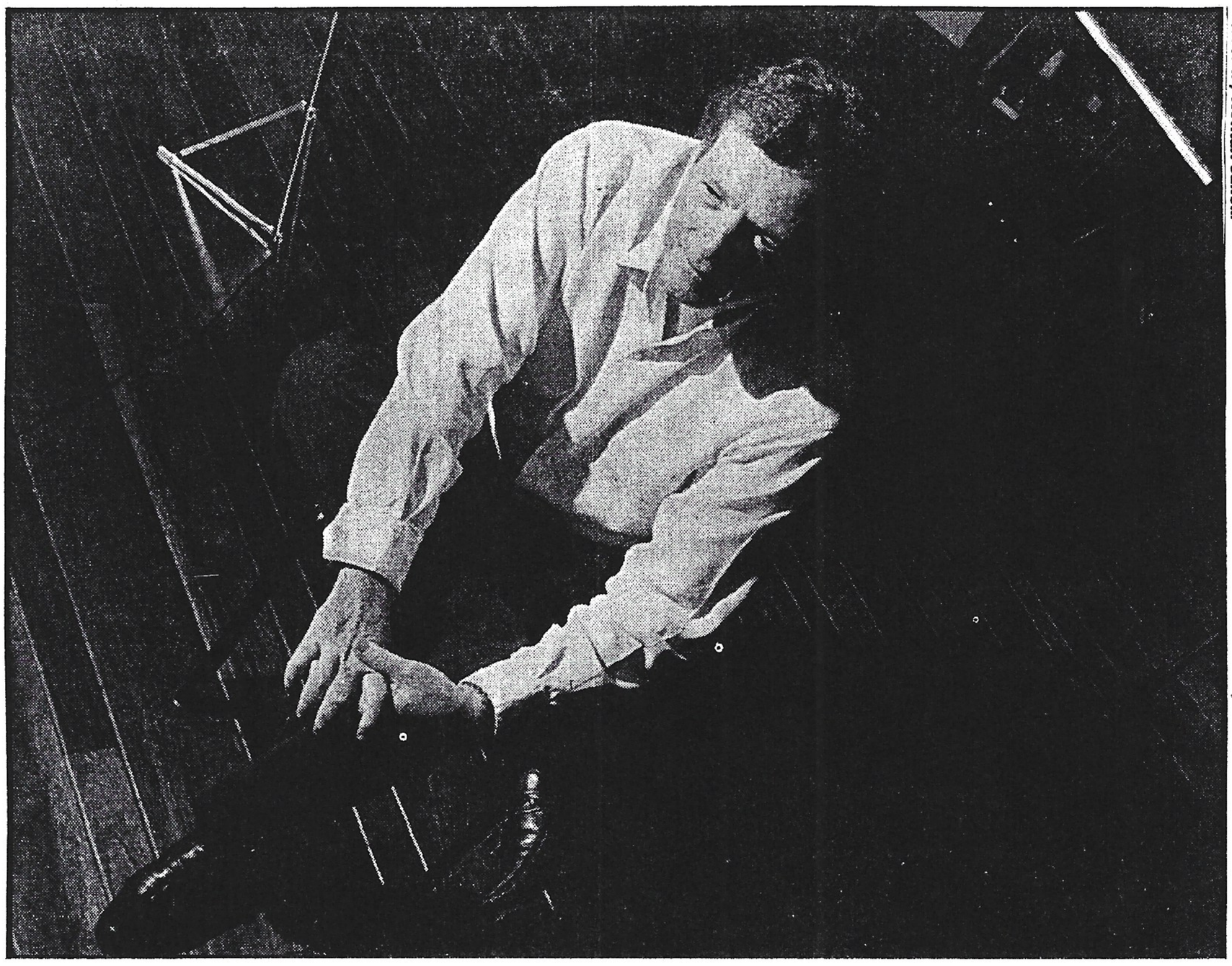

Photo by Roman Salicki

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Photo by Roman Salicki

to coming back?

Shel Talmy: I was fairly well stuck in there [the English scene] by then. What I did do was come back in 1963 to try to reach and tell everybody I could in the record business in California — I didn't know anybody in New York — that there was about to be a British Invasion or Explosion, whatever you want to call it, and they all said, 'Sure kid, thanks for letting us know. Don't call us, we'll call you.' I received a lot of apologies after that, but, y' know, big deal. I could have wound up with everybody for a few grand which I didn't have at the time. I think I could have gotten the U.S. rights to the Stones for two thousand dollars, the Beatles for five grand, and everybody else for 200 bucks each. But nobody wanted to listen, so there you go.

Goldmine: After your initial assignments at Decca you began to freelance for other labels and also began your first long-term production relationship with one of the few Brit beat bands to survive to today, the Kinks. What were the studio conditions under which you first recorded them?

Shel Talmy: We recorded in two studios only, one being Pye, who had two studios in their building which for the time were as good as you could get, and the other studio was IBC, which was the one and only major independent studio at the time. That was an old Georgian style building that had been made into a studio and a damn good one. The conditions were the same as you'd find in the U.S. at the time: everybody was using Ampex recorders, the boards were pretty primitive and everybody used the same limiters, same EQ, and no matter where you went the microphones were all the same.

Goldmine: And the bands all played live in the studio, I would assume.

Shel Talmy: Oh yeah.

Goldmine: Dave Davies told me all the early solos were done very quickly, under the gun of running out of studio time.

Shel Talmy: That's true. One of the problems, which I tried to keep from them was, the guy who ran Pye at that time was one of the worst people I ever had the displeasure of meeting. He was really a creep and he was really a bastard, even as inexpensive as things were in comparison to now, in terms of, you can't spend more than this and if you do, it's coming out of your — meaning my — bread, as opposed to the band's. So it was a matter of survival. I tried not to rush them, but in many ways I had a gun to my head. This was still very early in my career where my personal money was not anything to write home about, so I did whatever I could to make sure we got done within the time he gave us.

Goldmine: Dave also said that there was some experimentation done, referring specifically to a slower, he felt Phil Spectorish, "You Really Got Me."

Shel Talmy: The first version of "You Really Got Me" was a much bluesier version than the one you know, and much slower. We did it, oh, about 25 percent slower and if you picture the riff, you'll see it really goes well with blues. It certainly wasn't a Phil Spector version. I don't know what that is. It was extremely good and a totally different concept from the one that eventually came out. We all liked it at the time, decided to try it the other way, and then decided that the later version should be the one that came out. I wish I had a copy of the old version. I have completely lost track of it. I don't know if anybody's got a copy of it anymore. It'd be great to hear it today.

Goldmine: Back then, singles were the medium of choice. How did you approach mixing those early records to make them jump out at whoever was listening?

Shel Talmy: I guess the simplistic way to explain it is, I mixed it with American ears. People told me they could always tell my records because they sounded American, which I guess they said referring to the rhythm section. In the case of "You Really Got Me" the guitar chords were part of the rhythm, there's no question, so I put all that stuff — guitar, bass and drums — very much up front. The rest of the sound of that record is really microphone technique. I used three different microphones on Dave's guitar for "You Really Got Me" and, I'm sure he told you, he used a razorblade on the cone and he kicked the amplifer to get the fuzz and stuff, which is true. It was my job to then translate that onto tape. That's what I did and I mixed that upfront, because it was the riff that really made that song.

Goldmine: Was there anything unique about recording a six-string Rickenbacker like Pete Townshend used to use?

Shel Talmy: Well, it obviously has a different sound. It has string noise, which I like. I like the click. And I did make an effort to capture that click because that's part of what the Rickenbacker sound is. Also, with Townshend, when we started to get into the feedback stuff like "Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere," I used three mics on the amplifiers to pick up that feedback, besides what was on the guitar itself. I'm not sure he used his Rickenbacker on that one. . .it's been a long time.

Goldmine: There were certain guitar/amp combinations you liked to use with groups like the Kinks and the Who. What were they?

Shel Talmy: Obviously Marshalls. I preferred them to Voxes. I thought they had more guts, more bite, more everything. We used some high-watts from time to time, but I really liked Marshalls.

Goldmine: Did you see yourself as a collaborative producer?

Shel Talmy: Absolutely. I am a hands-on producer, my definition of that being that I work with an artist from inception and collaborate in terms of choosing material and choosing the arrangements and making suggestions all the way through.

Goldmine: How would you help in developing material?

Shel Talmy: Mainly by making suggestions, certainly in terms of format and arrangements. I would work with that a great deal. Lyrically speaking, if something didn't make sense to me, I'd comment, but I'd never try to write stuff for them because as it happens, with Pete Townshend and Ray Davies, we're talking about two of the best writers that have ever been in rock 'n' roll. So I wouldn't have presumed to tell them how to write.

Goldmine: Do you think that because you worked with both the Kinks and the Who at approximately the same time that you were a conduit for ideas to flow between them?

Shel Talmy: I think it was inevitable. I think that's certainly true in terms of my translating some things to the Who. In fact, "I Can't Explain," which was the first record I did with them, was rather Kinks-like.

Goldmine: When the Who came in with "My Generation," did you think Okay, I can do this like I did Dave's guitar?

Shel Talmy: No, absolutely not. I approached every session as a separate entity and did what I did based on the material that was there. Let me say that I've been very fortunate to work with bands that I really like. I loved the Kinks and the Who and everything about what they were doing musically. I saw my role as putting a picture frame around what was already a pretty good picture. I've always started with the song. It's fair to say that you can get a mediocre band with a great song to have a hit; the opposite is never true. A great band with a lousy song is never going to make it.

Goldmine: Did you ever witness any of these guys' much-talked-about volatility in the studio?

Shel Talmy: I never did. At the time I was very young and they were very young, and I thought that going into a studio was basically being in control of the artist and the budget and all that stuff and I thought I had to maintain an arms-length attitude. I felt we were too close in age to be buddy-buddy and that it was up to me to steer the ship. In retrospect, I shouldn't have done that. I never hung out with them like I really wanted to. It never happened and a lot of it is my fualt. I wouldn't do it again, but I think it was necessary at the time. I think there was a certain amount of fear involved too. I mean, you're 22, 23 and business-wise you don't know what the hell is going on.

Goldmine: In terms of recording drums, you went from Mick Avory, whose stuff was always pretty straight-forward on the Kinks' records to Keith Moon.

Shel Talmy: To the greatest rock drummer of all time, which he was.

Goldmine: Yeah, but he was also, in terms of style, a little crazy.

Shel Talmy: I loved him. I never had a cross word with him. In fact, if anything, I got along better with him than anybody else in the band. I know he was crazy, I know of the antics, but I never had a problem with Keith. He was terrific. I really liked him a lot. He was very disciplined in

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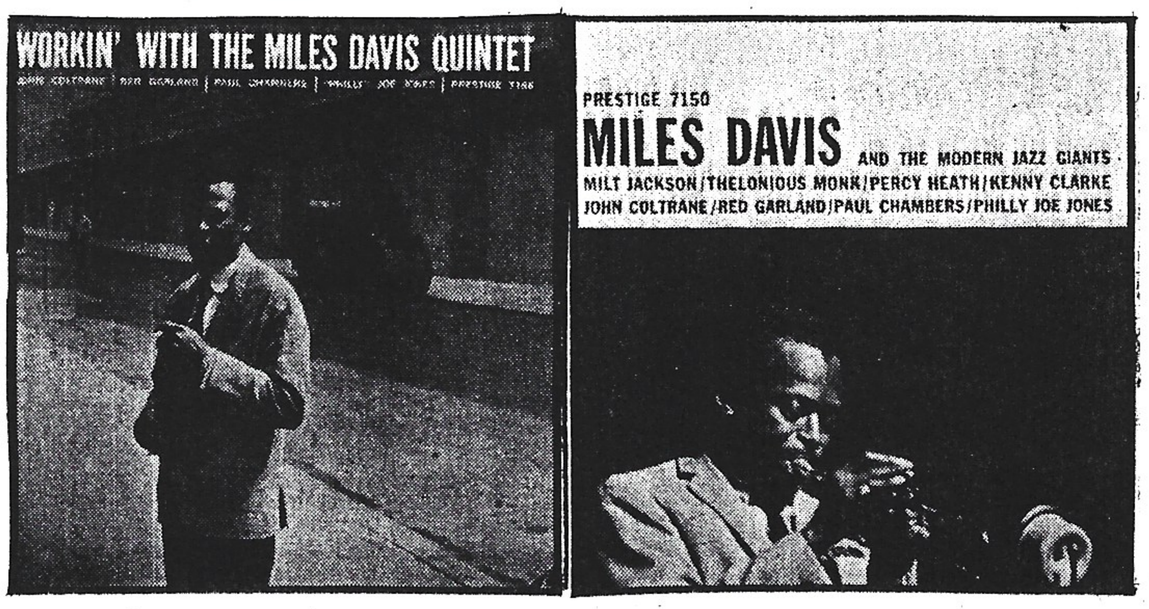
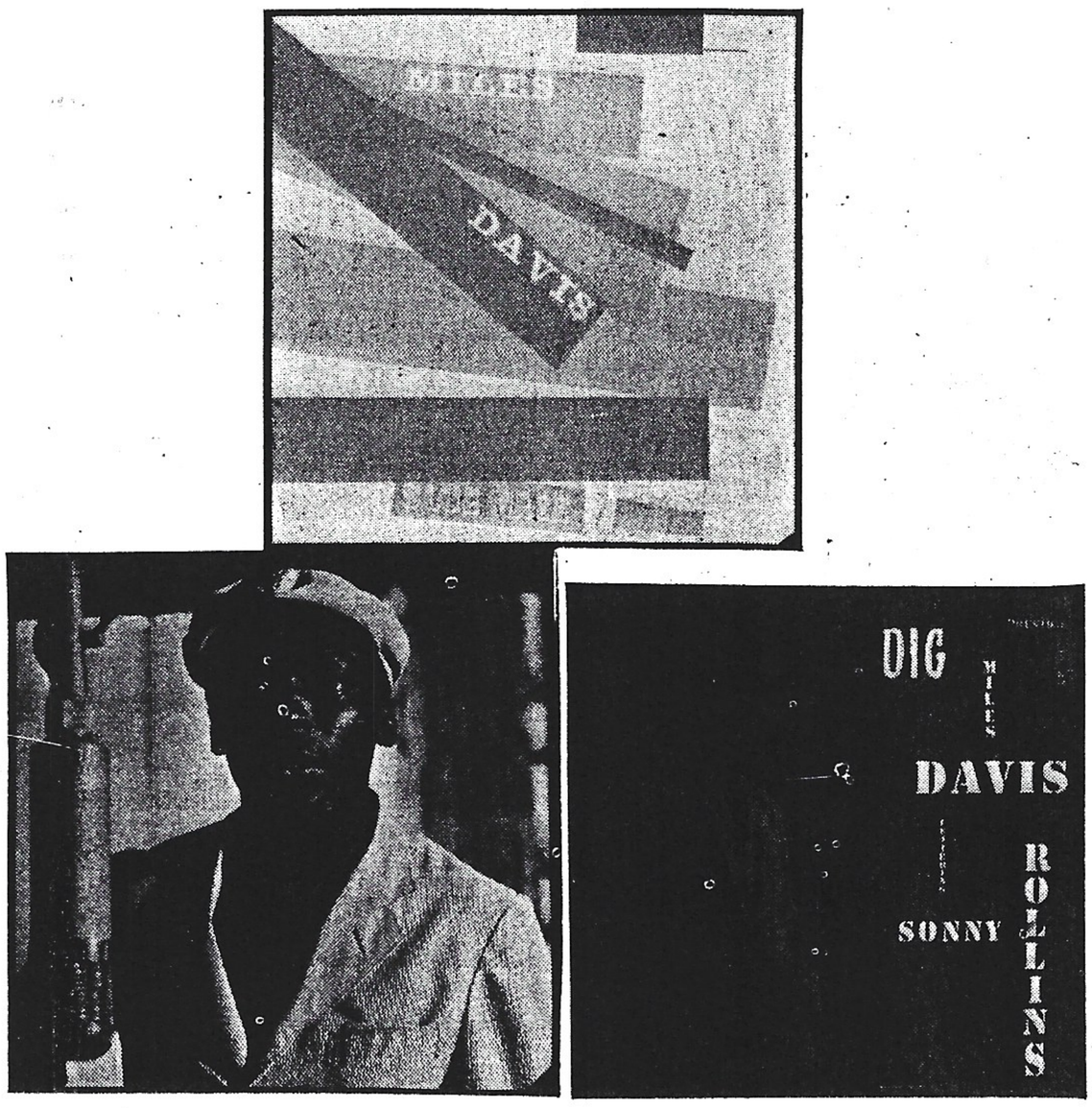

WORKIN' WITH THE MILES DAVIS QUINTET
PRESTIGE 7150
MILES DAVIS AND THE MODERN JAZZ GIANTS
MILT JACKSON/THELONIOUS MONK/PERCY HEATH/KENNY CLARKE
JOHN COLTRANE/RED GARLAND/PAUL CHAMBERS/PHILLY JOE JONES

MILES DISCOGRAPHY from page 17

?	?	Live At Birdland 1951	1976
?	?	Charlie Parker/Miles Davis/Dizzy Gillespie	1976
Savoy	2201	Bird/The Savoy Recordings (Master Takes): Charlie Parker (Davis appears as sideman) (recorded 1945-1948)	1976
Prestige	7322	Plays Richard Rodgers	1976
Prestige	24064	Green Haze (twofer reissue of 7007 and 7014)	1976
Columbia	33967	Agharta	1976
Chakra	100	Makin' Wax (bootleg) (recorded 1953-58)	?
Columbia	34396	Water Babies (recorded in the late 1960s)	1976
Prestige	24077	Tune Up (recorded 1953-1954)	1977
Columbia	34804	In Paris Festival International De Jazz: The Miles Davis/Tadd Dameron Quintet (recorded 1949)	1977
Columbia Special Products	13811	Facets (recorded 1955-1962)	1977
Prestige		Collectors' Items: The Miles Davis All-Stars (reissue of 7044)	1979
Columbia	36278	Circle In The Round (recorded 1955-1970)	1979
Prestige	012	Chronicle: The Complete Prestige Recordings, 1951-1956	1980
Columbia	36472	Directions (recorded 1960-1970)	1981
Columbia	36790	The Man With The Horn	1981
Columbia	1374	Miles To Go (promotional) (recorded 1959-1981)	1982
Columbia	38005	We Want Miles	1982
Columbia	38220	Sketches Of Spain/In A Silent Way (reissue of 8271 and 9875)	1982
Columbia	38262	? (recorded 1958)	1982
Prestige	5053	Miles Davis And Horns (recorded 1951-1953)	1983
Prestige	7858	Live At The Barrel: Jimmy Forrest/Miles Davis (reissue of Jazz Showcase 5004) (recorded 1952)	1983
Columbia	38657	Star People	1983
Columbia	38991	Decoy	1984
Blue Note	81501	Miles Davis Volume One (recorded 1952-1953)	1985
Blue Note	81502	Miles Davis Volume Two (recorded 1952-1954)	1985
Contemporary	57645	At Last!: Miles Davis & The Lighthouse All-Stars (recorded 1953)	1985
Columbia	40023	You're Under Arrest	1985
Pair	218797	The Best Of Miles Davis	1985
Warner	25490	Tutu	1986
Fresh Sound	302	Hi-Hat All-Stars (recorded 1955)	1987
Columbia	40577	Bitches Brew (reissue of 26)	1987
Columbia	40578	Sketches Of Spain (reissue of 8271)	1987
Columbia	40579	Kind Of Blue (reissue of 8163)	1987
Columbia	40580	In A Silent Way (reissue of 9875)	1987
Columbia	40609	Live Miles: More Music From The Legendary Carnegie Hall Concert (recorded 1961)	1987
Columbia	40610	'Round About Midnight (reissue of 8649)	1987
Columbia	40645	Cookin' At The Plugged Nickel (recorded 1965)	1987
Columbia	40647	Porgy And Bess (reissue of 8085)	1987
Columbia	40784	Miles Ahead (reissue of 8633)	1987
Columbia	40837	Milestones (reissue of 9428)	1987
Warner	25655	Music From Siesta	1987
Savoy	1196	First Miles (recorded 1945-1947)	1988
Bluebird	7636	The Metronome All-Stars (Davis appears on three tracks recorded 1949)	1988
PolyGram	836 305	Ascenseur Por L'Echafaud (movie soundtrack recorded 1957; some tracks previously released in U.S. on Columbia 1268)	1988
Columbia	44052	Miles and Coltrane: Miles Davis and John Coltrane (recorded 1955-1958)	1988
Columbia	44151	Ballads (recorded 1961-1963)	1988
Columbia	44165-7	The Divine Sarah Vaughan: The Columbia Years 1949-1953 (Davis appears as sideman on six tracks recorded 1950; reissued from 745)	1988
Columbia	44257	Friday Night At The Blackhawk, Vol. 1 (reissue of 1669)	1988
Columbia	45000	The Columbia Years 1955-1985	1988
Phillips	838 254	Miles Davis (recorded 1951-1958)	1989
Columbia	44425	Saturday Night At The Blackhawk, Vol. 2 (reissue of 1670)	1989
Warner	25873	Amandla	1989
Columbia	45332	Aura (recorded 1985)	1989
Capitol	92862	Birth Of the Cool (recorded 1949-1950)	1990
Columbia	46113	Nefertiti (reissue of 9594)	1990
Columbia	46115	Pangaea (recorded 1975)	1990
Columbia	46116	Filles De Kilimanjaro (reissue of 9750)	1990



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the studio. You're talking about a guy who was a wonderful drummer. "If we put up mics and said "Keith, can you manage to avoid hitting that mic?" No problem. Because sometimes I wanted to get really close to the snare. His drumming was always fantastic and no, he never threw his sticks up in the air in the studio and jumped on top of the bass drum.

Goldmine: But he was an aggressive drummer in what is essentially thought of as a guitar dominated band. How did you come to terms with that?

Shel Talmy: What I did was. . .he would listen. If he did too much of something, which he could do, I'd say please cool it, cut your fills down a touch. No problem. Now the other thing, going back to what I said earlier about recording the rhythm section on one track, maybe two if we had the luxury of four-track, was I would be careful to balance the sound while they were doing the take, so that the drums, bass and guitar were where they should be.

Goldmine: Roger Daltrey is a much different kind of singer than Ray Davies is. Did you have to use different kinds of mics to record them?

Shel Talmy: I did use two different mics to record them, although I'm not sure at this stage of the game if I can tell you which two mics I used. I used a more brilliant mic, I'm pretty sure a condenser, for Daltrey. He's got that kind of voice. Ray, well, I think Ray is one of the great interpretive singers; he doesn't have a great voice, but he has a very good commercial voice, so it was a whole different technique. On things like "Tired Of Waiting" he was half an inch from the mic when we got to those middle-eight bits, which were almost whispered. I would never do that with Daltrey.

Goldmine: How did you deal with the actual nuts and bolts assembly of an album before the album-rock era?

Shel Talmy: I was dealing with two very prolific writers, Ray in particular, so I spent a lot time saying, "Absolutely, let's do that one. This other one I don't think is ready yet. This one could use some work." He'd come in with 30 songs after a night's work, so there was an awful lot to choose from. All I could do was ask, Which ones do you fell really strongly about? And then I'd start paring stuff down, as opposed to looking for more material.

Goldmine: Was working with Manfred Mann and Chad and Jeremy an entirely different experience?

Shel Talmy: Manfred Mann, at the time, was comprised of all college guys, all very bright, in fact extremely bright, who would rather sit and argue politics than do a record on many occasions. My role with them, I thought quite often, was to act as resident shrink as opposed to resident producer. I'd have to mediate all these political arguments that were going on until they finally got down to recording. What really distinguished them from other acts that I worked with was, although they wrote, they did not write a lot of their hit material.

Chad and Jeremy, on the other hand, did write a lot of the stuff we did — two entirely different guys there too: Jeremy was from an extremely good English family, related to the Duke of Wellington or something like that, and went to Eaton, and Chad was. . .very sarcastic. . .and that was fine. I could handle that stuff and they worked very well together. The musical blend was excellent. I've always throught they were the forerunners of Simon and Garfunkel and certainly Peter and Gordon patterned themselves after Chad and Jeremy. I don't know why they didn't carry on, quite frankly.

Goldmine: What made you decide to get into producing again, after not doing it for over a decade?

Shel Talmy: It really just came about because I was approached by the Fuzztones and I went to meet them and liked what I heard a lot. Once we went in to do the LP, I had so much fun doing it that I decided it would be fun to do it full-time again.

Goldmine: Do you find you have a lot of luxuries at your disposal recording today?

Shel Talmy: Well, this'll sound like a joke to you, but I think the two greatest improvements that weren't available in the '60s are, number one, a guitar tuner — I can't tell you the number of hours I hung around waiting for people to tune their guitars — and number two, probably the vary speed on a tape machine, because the machinations we used to have to go through to speed up a track were unbelievable. Obviously the outboard equipment is much better today; however, every band and every studio is using the old standby limiter/compressors, and tube microphones are very much in demand. So we're talking about progress and then the acknowledgement of the fact that certain of those things we used back in the '60s are the best way to go.